

# ALUMNI SEMINAR IN ISRAEL

## ON THE GERMAN-US-ISRAELI RELATIONSHIP

**MAY 16-21, 2017**

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From May 16-21, the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung Israel and the American Jewish Committee partnered together to host the inaugural delegation for the KAS AJC alumni seminar in Israel.

An initiative of the KAS-AJC-Alumni-Network, the seven-day program afforded alumni from Germany and the U.S. a chance to visit Israel with bi-cultural eyes, interpreting history and current affairs through the prism of the trilateral relationship between the U.S., Germany and Israel. The 11 participants from Germany and Israel had an in-depth exposure to contemporary political issues as well as the historical legacies that shape Israel's identity.

The program was designed to provide participants with a deeper understanding of Israel, including its political, historical, cultural, strategic and religious dimensions.

On the evening of May 16, participants of the program met for the first time and introduced themselves and their interest in this study program. Lt. Col. (res.) Avital Leibovich, director of the AJC Jerusalem as well as Dr. Michael Borchard, resident representative of KAS Israel welcomed participants and stressed the importance of this joint initiative. They both conveyed the promise that programs like these contribute to the overall relationship between the Jewish and German relationship and the need for understanding and how to move forward from the tumultuous past. The momentum was strong already on the first full day of the program, where participants visited Yad Vashem together and took an intense 2 hour tour of the museum. Following the tour, Dr. Rachel Korazim sat with the alumni to discuss Jewish identity after the Holocaust and how these different backgrounds processed the understanding of how the Holocaust could have happened to the Jewish people. Dr. Korazim brought the participants through a journey of Jewish identity, rationalization, and response to the events of the Holocaust and in that journey, the participants arrived in the State of Israel, with all of its opportunities and challenges.

The latter part of the afternoon was spent at the Knesset, where participants had the opportunity to hear from three members from three different political parties.

MK Mickey Levy, who serves as a politician for the center party Yesh Atid (Hebrew for "there is hope", opposition) presented his view of the conflict. Longing for peace he plead: "We need to sign any agreement!" And while Mickey Levy supports the Two-State-Solution, concerning Jerusalem he states very clearly: "Jerusalem belongs to the Jewish nation." MK Rachel Azaria, Knesset member for the center party Kulanu (Hebrew for "all of us", coalition), discussed her family and women's rights initiatives. During the meeting, she presented her main working fields: To strengthen mothers who are working in terms of reducing costs for kindergartens and after school activities. She also discussed her work in changing the structure of the work environment in order to accommodate parents to be more flexible when balancing work and family life. When asked about her party Kulanu, she summarized the goals of the party by explaining work to maintain the separation between state and religion and the independence of the Supreme court. Furthermore, Kulanu works against monopolies that increase costs of imported food and others.

A passionate MK Amir Ohana followed MK Azaria to explain the positions of his party the Likud. MK Ohana stressed that the major issue discussed in elections is the conflict and hence explained his perspective. He claimed that not only Hamas, but also the PLO are no real partner for the Israeli government because they strive to "liberate Palestine" and are not really interested in a two-state-solution. He also expressed his desire for peace and quiet and suggested: "We can have peace without a treaty." Being proud of the "vibrant and flourishing democracy" in Israel he further described the IDF as progressive army that includes LGTBs for already more than 20 years.

Ramallah

The following day, the Alumni delegation visited KAS Ramallah office and received a briefing with KAS Ramallah resident representative, Marc Frings. Mr. Frings gave a short introduction into the geography of the Westbank and Gaza, the ABC areas, refugee camps and the issue of settlements. Asked, if the two-state-solution could lead to step backwards democracy-wise, he pointed out the long tradition of democracy and self-determination of Palestinians and portrayed the situation as much better in comparison to other Arab countries, despite this experts perceive a decline of

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democracy and human rights. Frings nevertheless supports a two-state-solution under Israeli security for humanitarian reasons. Furthermore, the group discussed the status of refugees that is "inherited" to the third generation already and the responsibility of the UN in providing healthcare and education.

During lunch two young professionals, Dr. Sarah Husseini and Derrar Ghanem, presented their perspective on the situation in the West Bank. Mr. Ghanem, who is actively working in the field of start-ups, pointed out that "the internet is the only open highway" and talked about the chances of the IT-branch and start-ups in Palestine. When questioned about the government, he expressed his disappointment and questioned whom the PLO represents. Sarah Husseini, a young politician, focused on the imbalance of power and showed her frustration over the "ceiling" on Palestinian activity, what she described as restrictions by the Israeli government. Members of the group encouraged to take action and use the "room" they have, hinting to Dr. Salam Fayyad's approach of "self-empowerment".

Sam Bahour, a Palestinian-American political commentator, shared his personal story of living in Ramallah. He aimed to describe the so-called invisible part of the occupation that is manifested in many restrictions. Palestinians living in the Westbank "work around Israeli districts", he said, picturing the A and B areas like cages within the area C. Asked about Trump, he stated: "Trump and Bibi want to take us back to one state, and I don't know if Israelis could live with one state." Though being so critical and cynical about the current situation he ended his talk with hope: "We are very close to our own state."

Participants concluded the intense day at the AJC Office in Jerusalem, where AJC Director, Lt.Col. (res.) Avital Leibovich answered open questions the participants had regarding the issues within the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Despite the optimism by Mr. Bahour earlier in the day. Ms. Leibovich did not see peace as around the corner, and sees it contingent upon the economy. Additionally, Ms. Leibovich points out that conflict ultimately cannot be resolved by outside forces and Palestinians and Israelis must carry the burden of finding a positive outcome for both peoples. Ms. Leibovich discussed the Israeli perspective on the state of affairs and pointed out how Israel has succeeded in so many ways and has flourished despite the challenges that is faced. She points out that there is always work to be done to improve Israel as a whole, particularly in education and economy, but the state must also always remain a strong force in the region. Ms. Leibovich also highlighted that the biggest threat for Israel is Iran, and in addition to efforts to resolve the Israeli Palestinian conflict being moot, Israel is skeptical of the capabilities for the Palestinians to have their own state, adding that the last thing the region needs is another failed state. Cautiously optimistic, Ms. Leibovich summed up her assessment explaining that Palestinian independence must come in stages and that these stages, such as building industry and economy, are a work in progress.

The following day, participants were briefed on the Israel security and society at the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung office in Jerusalem. Brigadier General (Ret.) Israela Oron served as Deputy National Security Adviser at Israel's National Security Council (NSC) briefed participants on the various security threats Israel faces. Ms. Oron highlighted that Israel cannot have real cooperation with the Arab world without a real deal. She also commented that the Arab Peace Initiative is not only the best way to deal with Hamas, it is the only way and added that if Israel wanted to sign an agreement with a Palestinian government we have to deal with a government that represents all the people. Dr. Eran Lerman, the former Deputy of Foreign Policy and International Affairs at Israel's National Security Council . Dr. Lerman reviewed the different parts of the conflict and discussed the status of Turkey under Erdogan and commented on Israeli populations and the current shift of public opinions. Dr. Nimrod Novik served as Advisor on Foreign Policy to Shimon Peres during his tenure as Prime Minister and discussed the fact that many IDF generals are united to the two-state solution. He discussed how it is viewed that a political-regional approach and an arrangement with the moderate Arab states has a chance of bringing about an agreement with the Palestinians, stability, security and economic prosperity.

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The day ended in Jaffo, where participants met with retired IDF Colonel and political scientist, Miri Eisen. Eisen discussed the different fabrics of Israeli society and the contradictions that Israel brings to the table: Universal values versus the religious community. She pointed out how in each part of the societies in Israel have different definitions on topics such as: feminism, high tech, racism, and also the topic of a Jewish democratic state- because while there are Jews and religion, the ideals of being Jewish and how it is handled varies across a broad spectrum. Eisen pointed out the different challenges and promise within Israel society but came to a sincere conclusion: while it is easy to ignore the conflict, one way it does expose itself is in the voting patterns of Israeli society.

The following day, the program took the AJC KAS participants up north. The first stop was with the Mayor of Shibli, Naim Shibli who spoke not only of the challenges of Arab-Jewish relations, but also highlighted the terrific cooperation that happens between the villages up north. Shibli presented his view about Jewish-Arab relations in the area of his village from his experience. In general, he presented a very positive and optimistic point of view and argued that a better co-existence is possible. He gave several examples from his experience as mayor in regards to several problems that came up with the Jewish village next to them and explained how through continuous dialogue they were able to reach good neighborly relations. The group went on to visit with former MK Hanna Swaid in Eilabound to understand the challenges facing the Arab minority in Israel. Swaid discussed Jewish-Arab relations in Israel mostly as part of the context of the wider Israeli-Palestinian conflict. He presented a critical view of the Israeli government and its treatment of the Arab Israeli citizens and said that the possibility of a Jewish and democratic state was a contradiction which cannot sustain in his opinion. Following the meeting with Swaid, participants met Brig. Gen. Res Nitzan Nuriel. Nuriel gave an overview of the current situation in the northern border from his view and experience as a former Israeli general. He explained the complexity of the situation in Syria and the Israeli policy in regards to the different players involved: The UN, Assad Regime, the Syrian Rebels, Hezbollah, and the U.S and Russia. Later, he took the group to a monument to the fallen Israeli soldiers in the 1973 Yom Kippur war and elaborated on the war and its consequences.

The day was concluded in Tel Aviv over dinner with former MK Dr. Einat Wilf as a speaker. Dr. Wilf painted a picture of Israeli society and what we are faced with in the current status quo. She explained what it would take to bringing an end to the occupation and her expectations. She discussed the Arab rejectionist position against Israel and what she saw as the challenges in the achieving a two state solution. Ultimately, she commented- there is a great need to work outside of the framework we previously had. And until both sides confront that reality- we remain at a standstill.

The last day of the program gave participants an overview of the start up culture in Israel. Amir Gelman, the principal of 500 start ups, focusing on investments and operations spoke to participants about the pulse of the Israeli startup culture and discussed the trends on investments. Following his briefing, the participants took a tour of famous start up success story WAZE and learned about the history and success of this technology.

Over lunch, participants held a closing session reviewing their experience with the first AJC KAS alumni delegation to Israel. While they all agreed that the program was extremely packed- they also understood that there was a great need to cover many complex topics in such a short time. They also requested the desire to spend more time in Jerusalem and to have more tour oriented sessions where they could understand the lay of the land. Another helpful comment was a request to have preparation material as a lot of the topics were very complex and they felt they did not have enough background knowledge on the topic.